

Sports, Bodies, and Futures: An Epilogue

Niko Besnier

When public school teachers and students of mid-nineteenth century Britain codified and regulated the physical activities that they would eventually call “sports,” they probably did not anticipate that what they were inventing would become, in the course of its century-and-a-half-long history, the focus of some of the most intense human passions. To be sure, they were convinced of the fact that their invention—rationalized, institutionalized, and quintessentially modern—was yet further proof of their unflinching sense of superiority, as men, as Christians, as white people, and as masters of the then-largest empire on the planet. They were codifying the rules of ball games with the deep conviction that physical activity was in the service of God, country, and empire. Not surprisingly, many of these boys and men were motivated by the doctrine of muscular Christianity, which emphasized asceticism, racial purity, and masculinity. This doctrine rejected cerebral and introverted forms of Protestantism that were dominant at the time, which disapproved of physicality as potentially leading to (God forbid!) pleasure. Muscular Christianity was a significant force in the early globalization of sports, well suited as it was to the White Man’s Burden, which sought either to virilize colonial subjects that they considered “degenerate” or, alternatively, to bring the “excessive” masculinity of others under colonial control (see Mangan 1998, among many others).

What the creators of sports probably did not consider was that the imperial project, for all its apparent formality and systematicity, was a surprisingly haphazard affair and that all empires fall, taking with them the ideologies and practices that enable them to maintain their power over the colonized. They undoubtedly also did not entertain the possibility that formerly colonized peoples, 150 years later, would appropriate for themselves some of the fundamental pillars on which the British Empire rested: Christianity, for example, as well as the very body practices that were sup-

posed to regulate and discipline colonized bodies, including sports. The sports that for so many decades were organized in the four corners of the empire by expat clubs and dominated by its agents (anxious to recreate little corners of Britain, France, and North America overseas rather than share the pleasure with the colonized) are today resolutely in the hands of others: cricket, whose center of gravity is firmly grounded in South Asia; soccer football, at the feet of Brazilians; and the various rugby codes, controlled by Fijians, Tongans, Samoans, and New Zealanders, particularly brown-skinned ones. Once empires crumble, such is the fate of inventions that originally served to maintain these empires.

Sports travel. In fact, the spread of the very idea of sports from the West to the Rest since the late nineteenth century can be thought of as one of the earliest manifestations of what we have come to think of, in the last couple of decades, as “globalization.” At first, British colonial officers, educationists, businessmen, and missionaries exported sports to the farthest reaches of the empire. Rugby union, among others, was first brought to settler colonies like Australia and New Zealand, from which they diffused to the Pacific Islands. Even where Britain has not planted its flag, its citizens did the work: British industrialists controlling the commercial, industrial, and agricultural sectors in Argentina took with them soccer football (as well as rugby and polo), and British sailors staged rugby games in Japan as soon as they were able to set foot in that country. What is particularly interesting about the circulation of sports around the world is that, although the rules of each sport may stay constant, their meanings diverge—people may play soccer football throughout the globalized world today, but they may also have radically different ideas about the game, about who should play it and how, and about how the sport relates to other activities in their lives.

These observations have led sport historian John MacAloon to characterize sport as an “empty form,” that is, a set of practices that have been uprooted from its original context, shorn of the meanings it held in this context, and then “refilled” with local meanings (MacAloon 1996). Thus rugby union, a sport of British elites (particularly in contrast to rugby league after the two codes fissioned in 1895), became in France the sport of the rural, socialist, anticlerical southwestern part of the country, defiant of Paris’s bourgeois, conservative, and Catholic elitism (Darbon 2007; Dine 2001). But others have questioned the extent to which sport is ever completely “emptied” of its colonial origins and its affinities to a

particular vision of the world, with a specific morality, worldview, and gendering. For example, C L R James's classic work *Beyond a Boundary* (2013 [1963]) demonstrates the deep interpenetration of colonial politics and cricket in the Caribbean, which hardly supports the view of the sport as simply "emptied" and then "refilled" as it travels the world (see also Brownell 1995, 290–291).

But, throughout its history, sport has been traveling in other ways. Almost right from the moment of its invention, athletes began moving across national boundaries, often acting as vectors for the global diffusion of sports. Yet the movement of athletes specifically associated with sporting careers was long largely confined to neighboring countries, as club officials hired athletes with whom they felt comfortable on the basis of geographical contiguity, personal connections, or linguistic or religious affinities (McGovern 2002). In the last decades of the twentieth century, athlete mobility took a new turn, as the commoditization of the main professional sports raised the stakes, and clubs and teams, now corporations in competition with one another for cheap labor, began searching much farther afield than before for promising young athletes wherever they could be most cheaply acquired. As a result, today, for young men in many parts of the Global South, the possibility of migrating to a career in the sports industries of the wealthy areas of the world mobilizes enormous energy, as is the case with Pacific Islander youth dreaming of playing rugby in New Zealand, Australia, or Europe. But these dreams of sudden success operate within a complex context: at the same time as successful athletes occupy the front lines of a global industry of extraordinary public visibility, sport is the only sector of the global labor market in which workers can be legally bought and sold, with the body at the center of these dynamics.

In societies in which hope for the future has but one configuration—namely, emigration to the postindustrial centers of the world with the expectation that exile will transform geographical mobility into social mobility—the migrant professional athlete is the object of multiple expectations, demands, and hopes, many of which have little to do with sport and everything to do with kinship, communities, congregations, villages, and the state. Most sport mobility involves not only individual athletes but also a host of other agents (including families who move with them, relatives who stay behind, and communities that depend on the migrants); brokers of many kinds (including scouts, recruiting agencies, and man-

agers); and a host of different dynamics (including economic concerns, politics, images, emotions, and state policies), all motivated by divergent agendas and distinct priorities.

The Pacific Islands are a particularly rich context in which to explore the way in which sport is not just a game or “mere entertainment” but rather a profoundly significant aspect of people’s lives, and one that is growing in importance at this very moment in history. Deemed insignificant on the contemporary global scene for all purposes that “matter,” the Pacific Islands paradoxically hold enormous sway in globalized sports, whether through the powerful male bodies that dominate the rugby or gridiron field (in this issue, see Lakisa and others; Uperesa); the so-called “war dances” (*haka*, *sipi tau*, etc) that teams perform before each international game, to the delight of world audiences that are largely oblivious to their controversial nature (see Calabrò; Clément); or the hidden “virgin” surfing grounds that the region’s beaches offer to privileged Australian surfer tourists in search of the ultimate wave, the ultimate primitive frontier, and the ultimate drunk, not necessarily in this order (West).

For Pasifika people and other indigenous people of the region, however, sport may hold quite different meanings from those that teams and other actors market to the public with the very bodies of the players. For them, sport is frequently embedded in a vast panoply of resources for the conduct of social relations and for making a living, particularly when material resources are few and far between. For Māori rugby players in New Zealand, for example, the sport represents both a link to the communalism of ethnic identity and a way of challenging a long history of race-based marginalization, albeit with mixed results (Calabrò). For rugby league athletes of Pacific Islander and Māori origins in Australia, the game is deeply enmeshed with the Christianity that, in many parts of the Pacific region, figures centrally in all definitions of “tradition” (Lakisa and others). In rural Sāmoa, rugby is saturated with the hierarchical and kin-based organization of village life—from the informal games of “touch” that boys and young men stage on a daily basis at the end of the workday to the brawls in which entire villages take part when passions boil over (Clément). Outside audiences and “stakeholders” can easily miss the extent to which sport in the Pacific Islands is saturated with social relations, as is the case with New Zealand-based officials when they try to understand what happens to FIFA money for soccer development in Solomon Islands (Mountjoy). They may refuse to even notice it, as do IRB offi-

cials when they visit Sāmoa and dismiss impromptu village games of touch rugby as irrelevant to the sport's development (Clément), to say nothing of wealthy Australian surfer tourists' profound lack of interest in Papua New Guinean villagers' lives taking place right next to the surfing resort they patronize (West).

Perhaps the most dramatic way in which Pacific Island sports are enmeshed with ties that bind is embodied in the promises of migration to an athletic career in the industrial world. In diasporic societies like Sāmoa and Tonga and countries like Fiji that are fast becoming emigrant societies, the promise of an athletic career overseas represents a deeply significant turn, as well as a deeply problematic one, from the pattern of unskilled worker emigration on which entire national economies have been depending for the last half century. Unlike the migration of underclass workers to the lower rungs of labor forces in industrial countries, sports migrations evoke millenarian images of sudden success and unimagined prosperity, affording young men the fantasy of redistributing untold wealth, often in preference to keeping it for themselves, and thus reclaiming male productive citizenship. In American Sāmoa (Uperesa) and Fiji (Teaiwa 2005), sport migration competes with another, partially overlapping, and equally gendered way of glorifying citizenship, namely enlisting in the military, although of course the material returns of the latter option pale in comparison to the potential returns of sports, and the dangers are considerably greater. The enchantment of "fabled futures" (Uperesa) that sport migration engenders is illustrative of a "casino capitalism" (Strange 1986; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), the magical emergence of wealth from nothing, which many see as a signature feature of the turn of the millennium. While in reality only the lucky few gain widespread recognition, the *possibility* of success in professional sports in the industrial world overshadows its *probability* (Kwauk), and it thus informs the actions and haunts the dreams of countless others in the Pacific Islands and elsewhere in the developing world. These dreams fuel, to use a phrase that several contributors to this issue found inspiring, "a politics of hope that rubs shoulders with the reality of disappointment and exploitation" (Besnier 2012, 502).

In West and South Africa, such aspirations are given concrete substance in the "football farms," soccer training camps in which the European clubs that fund them seek to recruit the most talented at the cheapest moment of their sporting careers (Darby 2000). While these institutions do not yet exist in the Pacific region, the hopes that hang over them like tropical

clouds are alive and well in the islands, reconfiguring the meaning of “success” for emerging generations (Uperesa). There are other consequences, as illustrated by the case of West Africa. In Ghana, the socialist idealism of the heady early years of independence under the leadership of the charismatic father of the nation, Kwame Nkrumah, had elevated the development of education to the status of national priority. Today, in contrast, as the state’s turn to neoliberalism has ravaged the job market, there is widespread disillusionment with education: for an overwhelming majority, it no longer delivers its promises, and boys choose to apply in droves to be trained at these football farms, leaving education to girls, thus contributing to a dangerous widening of the gap between the two genders (Esson 2013). Kwauk and Uperesa both document similar patterns in Independent and American Sāmoa, respectively, where boys, intent on pursuing their rugby or gridiron dreams, are increasingly turning away from formal schooling. Yet these dynamics can only be understood as operating at the convergence of kinship obligations, moral codes, geopolitical dynamics, state and nongovernmental organization policies, and the global marketing of athletic glory.

The entanglement of sport with dynamics of power, however, is hardly a one-dimensional space in which international regulating bodies, corporate interests, and the hegemony that maintains them all exert seamless domination over agents. In fact, like beauty (see, eg, Edmonds 2010), athletic prowess has the power to undermine the basis on which other forms of structural inequality, such as wealth, pedigree, and race, are based—a fact that is only too obvious to successful athletes. These dynamics require us to approach sport in an agent-focused manner, attentive to both the determinative power of structures and their incomplete hold on agents, an attention that is particularly well served by the ethnographically inspired approaches that most of the contributors to this special issue have adopted.

An agent-focused research approach to sport can be deconstructive in other, perhaps more subtle, ways. For example, it can subject to critical scrutiny the racialized essentializing of bodies as being “natural” for particular sports—a theme that is overwhelmingly prevalent in popular discourse about the natural prowess or “flair” of particular groups, saturating as it does sport commentators’ monologues. History exposes the contingency of these judgments: prior to the early decades of the twentieth century, cricket was the game of Samoans and Tongans, while Fijians played soccer football long before they played rugby, which colonial

authorities deemed to be particularly ill-suited to the islands' climate, the physical constitution of Fijians, and their "temperament."¹ Inspired by Brendan Hokowhitu's pioneering work on Māori rugby players and their representation in mainstream New Zealand society (2004), several contributors to this issue (Uperesa, Clément, Kwauk, Calabrò) place essentialized discourse about "flair" in the critical context it deserves, demonstrating that it valorizes Pacific Island athletes as easily as it stereotypes and marginalizes them. As we know from Michel Foucault (1980), power in all its forms is a profoundly slippery mechanism, and the workings of power in sport are no exception.

We feel Foucault's ghostly presence in another aspect of sport in the Pacific Islands, namely the development efforts of which it is the object. As in many other parts of the world, sport is seen as the ideal way of "making people get along," while at the same time improving their health, keeping them off the streets, and "empowering" them. In Solomon Islands, ravaged by interethnic civil war in the early 2000s, many place their faith in soccer football as a way to foster reconciliation (Mountjoy). The trouble is, the different parties or "stakeholders"—local football teams, national sport officials, and representatives of regional and international regulatory bodies that hold the strings to the purse—have divergent ideas about how to go about this reconciliation and how the money should be spent. These divergences are more than just different ideas; they involve different epistemologies about the sport, the nation, "development," and the future, yet they are strikingly backgrounded as representatives of these different perspectives that come together to try to "sort things out." Contributors to this issue encountered comparable incommensurabilities elsewhere in the region, as in Sāmoa (Kwauk), where governmental and nongovernmental agencies promote "sport" (in quotation marks because it remains a vague concept) as a way of combating the fierce epidemic of noncommunicable diseases for which the country, and the region at large, is vilified. On the ground, however, sport means something considerably different from the meaning that these officials attribute to it: it means a "ticket out" (*i fafo*), an opening to a career elsewhere than the local context in which a job, let alone a career in sport, is an extraordinarily rare resource.

Perhaps more than any other field of social practice, sports provide an extraordinarily rich window into problems of scale: the way in which bodies and the selves that inhabit them both shape and are shaped by multiply embedded structures, from kinship to "community" in its various guises, to the nation, the diaspora, the state, the market, and the global condition.

As the contributors to this issue have demonstrated, the Pacific Islands, that “sea of islands” at once forgotten by the rest of the world and deeply central to it (Teaiwa 2001, Besnier 2011), is a remarkably pertinent context in which to unravel these tightly plaited strands.

* * *

THE RESEARCH THAT BACKGROUNDS *this brief epilogue* is a large-scale comparative project entitled “Sports, Globalization, and the Precarity of Masculinity,” funded by the European Research Council (2012–2017). I thank anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft.

Note

1 “In a temperature of 80 degrees in the shade, where passions are apt to rise with the thermometer, [rugby] football is unlikely to become a national game” (Thomson 1908: 332–333, quoted in Dewey 2013). At the Fiji Rugby Centenary Conference in Suva, Fiji (1–3 July 2013), the president of Fiji, Rātū Epeli Nailatikau, explained that, in his youth, he and his rugby teammates could never understand why the early team photographs hanging on the wall of their rugby club showed eleven players rather than fifteen, with one dressed differently from the rest. In Fiji today, soccer football is the sport “naturally” associated with Fiji Indians.

References

Besnier, Niko

2011 *On the Edge of the Global: Modern Anxieties in the Pacific Island Nation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

2012 The Athlete’s Body and the Global Condition: Tongan Rugby Players in Japan. *American Ethnologist* 39:491–510.

Brownell, Susan

1995 *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People’s Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Comaroff, Jean, and John L Comaroff

2000 Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming. *Public Culture* 12:291–343.

Darby, Paul

2000 The New Scramble for Africa: African Football Labour Migration to Europe. *European Sports History Review* 3:217–244.

Darbon, Sébastien

2007 *Une brève histoire du rugby*. Paris: L'œil neuf.

Dewey, Robert

2013 Rakavi 100: The Fiji Rugby Centennial and the Origins of Rugby in Fiji. Paper presented at the Fiji Rugby Centenary Conference, University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1–2 July.

Dine, Philip

2001 *French Rugby Football: A Cultural History*. Oxford: Berg.

Edmonds, Alexander

2010 *Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Esson, James

2013 A Body and a Dream at a Vital Conjuncture: Ghanaian Youth, Uncertainty and the Allure of Football. *Geoforum* 47:84–92.

Foucault, Michel

1980 *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Translated by Colin Gordon. New York: Vintage.

Hokowhitu, Brendan

2004 Tackling Māori Masculinity: A Colonial Genealogy of Savagery and Sport. *The Contemporary Pacific* 15:259–284.

James, C L R

2013 *Beyond a Boundary*. 50th anniversary edition, with an introduction by Robert Lipsyte. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. First published in 1963 by Hutchinson & Co.

MacAloon, John J

1996 Humanism as Political Necessity? Reflections on the Pathos of Anthropological Science in Olympic Contexts. *Quest* 48:67–81.

Mangan, J A

1998 *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal*. London: Routledge.

McGovern, Patrick

2002 Globalization or Internationalization? Foreign Footballers in the English League, 1946–95. *Sociology* 36:23–42.

Strange, Susan

1986 *Casino Capitalism*. London: Blackwell.

Teaiwa, Teresia K

2001 L(o)osing the Edge. *The Contemporary Pacific* 13:343–357.

2005 Articulated Cultures: Militarism and Masculinities in Fiji during the Mid-1990s. *Fijian Studies* 3:201–222.

Thomson, Basil

1908 *The Fijians: A Study of the Decay of Custom*. London: William Heinemann.

Abstract

Since their invention in mid-nineteenth century Britain, modern sports have traveled: first, as they were exported to all regions of the world, often piggybacking on colonial projects; second, as sports are often brought to troubled economies and states in the context of development and reconciliation projects; and third, as athletes moved across national and other borders to play and seek a livelihood by playing. Athlete mobility is more alive than ever in the contemporary world, and Pacific Islanders' participation in this mobility is disproportionate to the visibility of their nations on the global stage. Understanding the meaning of sport in the region, however, raises important questions whose implications reach beyond the confines of sport: the workings of power in a world in which bodies become commodities; the conflicts that arise between different epistemologies of development and resource use; and the clashes between different conceptualizations of the future.

KEYWORDS: sport, body, future, globalization, mobility, migration, development